



# **A Critical Reflection on Cambodian Women's Labour Migration in Southeast Asia**

A Coursework Thesis submitted to the  
College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences  
In partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Arts (Women's Studies)

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Date of Submission: 09 July 2021



## DECLARATION

*“I certify that this thesis:*

- 1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and*
- 2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.”*

*Signature of Student*

A handwritten signature in blue ink is written on a yellow rectangular background. The signature is stylized and appears to be 'Q. W.' followed by a flourish. Below the signature is a horizontal blue line.

*Date: 09 July 2021*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This coursework thesis would not have been possible without the financial support of Australia Awards Scholarships through Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I would like to express my deepest thanks to the Australian Government and the Australian people for this prestigious scholarship which enabled my dream of coming to study in Australia.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my research supervisor **Associate Professor Barbara Baird** who has given me the greatest guidance and support throughout the process of doing this coursework thesis. I would like to express my special thanks to **Daina Hayles** who provided editing assistance to improve the written quality of this thesis. I would also like to thank the following friends who have provided me with moral support and numerous useful documents for the analysis of my thesis: 1). **Reiko Harima**, Regional Coordinator of the Mekong Migration Network (MMN), 2). **Vireak Pin**, Executive Director of the Association of Cambodian Recruitment Agency (ACRA), and 3). **Sam Ol Ek**, National Project Officer in charge of the Counter Trafficking, Migrant Protection and Assistance Project of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) based in Cambodia.

My heartfelt thanks also go to my beloved wife and my kids for all of their wonderful support throughout the journey of my studies in Australia and during the writing of this thesis.

## **ABSTRACT**

This coursework thesis aims at understanding the situation of Cambodian female labour migrants working in three destination countries in Southeast Asia, namely Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, and how Cambodian female migration fits into the bigger picture of global economies and global politics. This is achieved through the use of a range of feminist perspectives, especially Marxist feminism, to analyse and provide critical reflection of Cambodian women's labour migration in the context of global capitalism. The analysis is guided by the literature on global capitalism and international migration. The findings reveal that the situation of Cambodian female labour migrants is best understood as part of the system of global capitalism. The Cambodian government can also be understood in this context; a large part of this, serving the needs of global capital as much as serving any concept of 'national good'. Caught in this clash are female labour migrants, often finding themselves in dire circumstances. This is a contentious situation with Cambodian female labour migrants resisting such exploitation whenever they can in order to be free from exploitation and improve their working conditions. Action has also been taken by civil society organisations (CSOs) to advocate for female migrant workers' rights and benefits. The agency of female labour migrants and the actions taken by CSOs and other actors have put pressure on the Cambodian government to improve its labour migration policies and practices.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ACRA	Association of Private Recruitment Agency
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CWCC	Cambodian Women's Crisis Center
EPS	Employment Permit System
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IWDFED	International Domestic Worker Federation
KNOMAD	Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development
LICADHO	Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights
MMN	Mekong Migration Network
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTUC	Malaysian Trades Union Congress
NCCT	National Committee for Counter Trafficking
NDFP	National Democratic Front of the Philippines
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLMC	Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia
PRA	Private Recruitment Agency
UN	United Nations
UN CEDAW	United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

UN DESA United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund  
UNTAC United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia  
UN ESCAP United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific  
UN WOMEN United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women  
US United States of America

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY**

Every year there are reports and news stories about the exploitation, abuse and even trafficking of female migrant workers across the globe. These women and girls are among those who have migrated out of their countries of origin to seek employment opportunities and better lives in their chosen destinations, in both developed and developing countries. There are numerous success stories of female labour migrants in their migration journeys. Concurrently, however, there are also many painful stories by female labour migrants for whom the experiences have not been positive. The central focus of the analysis will be the situation of Cambodian female migrants from 2015 up to the present.

To lend context I will outline my background. I worked for 15 years with the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC), a local not-for-profit organisation in Cambodia, on the issues of violence against women and transnational migration, especially female migration. From 2008 to 2019, I was nominated by the CWCC to become the focal person to deal with regional networks, working on issues of migration and trafficking. In this role, I became a regular member of Mekong Migration Network (MMN) based in Thailand, a partner of Migrant Forum in Asia based in the Philippines, and a member of Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women based in Thailand. I have been involved in various research projects, studies and dialogues around policy as a co-researcher, translator and advocator. Part of this role was to lobby and be an advocate to the Cambodian government and other governments in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and beyond for the promotion and protection of the rights of all migrants, especially female migrants. For more than a decade, working on migration and with migrants, I have seen Cambodian female migrants continuing to face challenges in their migration. This experience prompted me to write this coursework thesis on Cambodian women's labour migration. I have a desire to understand Cambodian female migration in depth and as part of the broader global context. I hope, through this analysis, I will be able to find ways to better approach the problems concerning female labour migration for my future career and academic endeavours.

### **1.1 Background of the Problems**

In recent decades there have been a growing number of women and girls migrating out of their countries of origin to seek employment opportunities abroad, especially in the countries wealthier than their home countries. This increasing number of female migrants in international migration, known as the feminisation of migration, has emerged due to the increasing demands for women in the feminised sectors of work such as domestic and manufacturing work (ADB,

2006, cited in Larsen, 2010), and accelerated by the dynamics of global capitalism that seeks to hire cheap labour for capitalist production and services. It is also due to women's increased ability to leave home to earn an income to support themselves and their families. This has been influenced by social changes to the gendered division of labour.

The feminisation of migration and global capitalism is evident in Southeast Asia where, as of 2019, around 10 million international migrants were living and working abroad, with the estimation that 48 per cent of them were female (UN DESA, 2019). Southeast Asia consists of 11 countries including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. UN DESA (2019) estimates that the total population of Southeast Asia was around 662 million by mid-2019 with the female population roughly 50% of this total. Cambodian female migrants have migrated to work in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

In capitalist societies the social reproduction of women is generally devalued so women who work in the reproduction sector such as domestic work are also devalued. This devaluation of women's domestic work often leads women to become victims of exploitation and perpetuates inequalities in the gendered division of labour. The low pay for these jobs and others where female workers predominate and the vulnerable situations in which many are employed amounts to significant exploitation.

This exploitation of workers including female workers in capitalist societies has created resistance whereby female workers, including female migrant workers, have struggled to be free from exploitation and improve their working conditions.

## **1.2 . Cambodia**

Cambodia, a source of labour migrants, has gone through much social, political and economic change in the past few decades. Influenced by the political ideologies of the superpower nations including the US and former Soviet Union, wars started ravaging Cambodia in the 1960s and lasted for at least three decades. From 1975 to 1979 Cambodia was then totally controlled by the Communist Party of Khmer Rouge. More than two million Cambodian people, especially educated middle-class people, were killed. The Khmer Rouge regime was then defeated by the Vietnamese troops and collapsed in 1979. The Cambodian government, under Vietnamese support, was not recognised by international communities until 1991. In 1991 Cambodia realised peace through the signing of Paris Peace Accords. In 1993 Cambodia organised its

first national elections with technical assistance from the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

Before 1991, Cambodia was isolated from the world economy, although efforts were made for economic reforms. Most of the businesses at that time were state-owned businesses and there was no formal trade between Cambodia and international markets (Chhair & Ung, 2013). In 1993, Cambodia started implementing a more comprehensive economic policy and integrating its economy into that of the world economy (Chhair & Ung, 2013). With policies that attracted foreign investment, foreign direct investments (FDI) of US\$124 million initially started flowing into Cambodia in 1993 (Chhair & Ung, 2013). Cambodia was seen to be in favour of the communist and socialist countries like China and Russia; yet, Cambodia has opened its markets to the world with the biggest international markets for Cambodia being Europe and the US, especially for clothing exports (Rastogi, 2018). Cambodia's newly-emerged economy was then distracted in 1997 due to a military attack conducted by Cambodian People's Party (CPP) against the ruling FUNCINPEC Party (Human Rights Watch, 2007; The Washington Post, 1997). The situation then returned to normalcy after the second national elections which took place in 1998. Since 1998, despite allegations of election fraud, CPP has continued to win national elections conducted every five years and Prime Minister Hun Sen has remained in power.

Despite substantive annual economic growth, Cambodia is still a poor country in the region and in the world. In 2007 nearly half of the total Cambodian population lived under the poverty line (The World Bank, 2019). In the last decade Cambodia has been successful in reducing poverty for its people but, as of 2020, 17.8% of the total 16 million Cambodian's were still living under the poverty line (The World Bank, 2019). Poverty and unemployment have pushed Cambodian outbound migration with its people looking for job opportunities abroad, especially in Southeast Asia with Thailand as the prime destination. Although more men than women have engaged in labour migration, a growing number of Cambodian women and girls have participated in labour migration over the past decade. This has prompted a new epoch in Cambodian transnational labour migration.

### **1.3 Thesis Theme and Questions**

This thesis offers a critical reflection on Cambodian women's labour migration in Southeast Asia in this contemporary era. In order to address this theme, this thesis asks the following questions: 1) How does the situation of Cambodian women who migrate for labour purposes

fit into the bigger picture of global economy and global politics? and 2) How do the actions of the Cambodian government fit into a bigger picture of labour migration? To answer these questions the thesis is guided by the literature on global capitalism and international migration. I argue that the situation of Cambodian female labour migrants is best understood as a part of the system of global capitalism. The Cambodian government can also be understood in this context, a large part of this serving the needs of global capital as much as serving any concept of 'national good'. Caught in this clash are female labour migrants, often finding themselves in dire circumstances. This situation is contested and Cambodian female labour migrants have resisted such exploitation whenever they can in order to be free from exploitation and improve working conditions. Action has also been taken by CSOs to advocate for female migrant workers' rights and benefits. The agency of female labour migrants and actions taken by CSOs and other actors has put pressure on the Cambodian government to improve its labour migration policies and practices.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Thesis**

In this contemporary era of a connected world where capitalism has already become global, the feminisation of migration and the issues related to female migrants are becoming increasingly important in scholarly discussions. This thesis will contribute to the academic scholarship of the Southeast Asian region in the field of gender and migration through providing an analysis about the lives of female migrant workers impacted by global capitalism. In addition, this thesis will provide benefits to non-academic readers, especially migrant rights' organisations and groups, who work on the issues of gender and migration in Southeast Asia, particularly in Cambodia where such critical analysis is rare.

#### **1.5 Methodology**

For the purpose of describing the setting for and finding the answers for the thesis questions, this thesis will draw from two separate bodies of existing literature including the work on gender and global capitalism and the critical work on female labour migration. In these bodies of existing literature, I have been influenced by the work of an American sociologist Joan Acker who wrote the important article "Gender, Capitalism and Globalisation". Her article has given me critical feminist perspectives about gender and global capitalism and how gender plays critical roles in the global capitalist world. I will apply Joan Acker's and other feminist perspectives, particularly Marxist feminist perspectives, in order to analyse the situation of Cambodian female migrants in Southeast Asia for this thesis. In so doing, I will firstly draw

together the literature on Cambodian female migration in the era of global capitalism from various sources including research studies/surveys, program reports and media news, and then view it through the lens of global capitalism and global labour migration research. Secondly, I will draw on the documentation of Cambodian government labour migration policies and actions, then view these through the lens of global capitalism and global labour migration research. Finally, I will form a critical analysis based on findings from the first and second discussions. These formal methods are supplemented by my own intelligence and local knowledge, especially in the asking of questions.

In this thesis, some important terms defined by International Organisation for Migration (IOM) will be used. “Migration” is “the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State” (IOM, 2019c, p. 137). A “migrant” is “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (IOM, 2019c, p. 132). A “labour migration” is “movement of persons from one State to another, or within their own country of residence, for the purpose of employment” (IOM, 2019c, p. 123), and a “migrant worker” as “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national” (IOM, 2019c, p. 136).

## **1.6 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This first chapter introduces the background and methodology and provides an overview of the thesis. The second and the third chapters are literature reviews. The second chapter focuses on the literature of global capitalism, while the third chapter focuses on international migration and the feminisation of migration. The critical analysis of the thesis is located in the fourth and the fifth chapters. The fourth chapter analyses the situation of female migrant workers in Cambodia who cross borders to work in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The fifth chapter analyses the labour migration policies and legislation of the Cambodian government and how these policies and legislation do or do not regulate labour migration of Cambodian female migrants in Southeast Asia. The existing literature on global capitalism and international migration will be used for the analysis of these two chapters. Finally, the conclusion summarises the literature, the findings, and the analysis as well as suggesting further research into some issues that are not covered.

## **1.7 Limitations**

As this research is based on existing literature, it may contain some gaps and unanswered questions and only the beginning of critical analyses. There is a critical lack of current literature concerning global capitalism and female migration for Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia. In addition, reports and news about Cambodia's female transnational migration are also limited. There are almost no existing reports that discuss the relationship between the issue of female migration (or male migration) with the issue of global capitalism in relation to Cambodia.

## CHAPTER 2: A FEMINIST ACCOUNT OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

### 2.1 Overview of Capitalism and Global Capitalism

Capitalism is widely regarded to have begun somewhere in the 1400s – 1500s (Acker, 2014; Beaud, 1981; Lippit, 2005; Robinson, 2014). It was first rooted in the Western world, specifically Western Europe and North America (Beaud, 1981; Scott, 2009). German philosophers and social historians Marx and Engels (1887) explain that capitalism operates through the accumulation of capital and gains benefits from the exploitation of labour by workers. Marx and Engels (1887) argue that the objects of production are commodities and those commodities are produced by the workers. Therefore the production of commodities need capital and capital functions through “the conversion of a sum of money into means of production and labour-power” (p. 564). The commodities produced by the means of production and the labour of workers are then to be sold at a price exceeding expenses - such as raw materials and labour fees, thus creating a surplus-value (Marx & Engels, 1887). The circulation and sale of these commodities generates income for the businesses of the capitalists and these incomes keep adding up to what Marx and Engels (1887) call “accumulation of capital”. Marx and Engels (1887) stress that capitalists use labourers to produce the value of commodities and the surplus-value through paying labourers less than the value produced by their labour, in fact as little as possible.

Capitalism is understood by many scholars as an “economic system” (Beck & Vogler, 2017; Merrill, 1995; Scott, 2009) and part of a “political economy” (Scott, 2009). Social historian Merrill (1995) claims that “Capitalism, more precisely, is a market economy ruled by, or in the interests of, capitalists” (p. 322). Merrill (1995) recognises that capitalism is “an economic system based on market exchange, private property, wage labour, and sophisticated financial instruments” and he asserts that “such features are necessary conditions for existence of capitalism” (p. 322).

Moreover, as capitalism is an economic system that links to the market economy, economist Scott (2009) suggests we “think of the economic markets of capitalism as part of a system of political economy” (p. 4). This is because Scott (2009) sees that institutions and political authority are inclusive of market operations in which his conception of capitalism “broadens the focus from market operations to include both the institutions that shape the market frameworks and the political authority that designs as well as governs the institutions in which markets are embedded” (p. 4). Scott (2009) notes that the term ‘political economy’ has been

used for at least a century referring to “economics” and that “the notion that markets were political as well as economic constructs was obvious” (p. 9).

A serious by-product of capitalism is how it has produced class systems in capitalist societies. These class systems produce class structures which many scholars, especially Marxist scholars, have clearly divided into two categories: capitalist or bourgeoisie and working-class or proletariat (Cohen, 1968; Giddens, 1980; Katz, 1993). The private ownership of property plays a very important role when distinguishing these class structures (Giddens, 1980) whereby the capitalists or bourgeoisie own the means of production and control over the labour force, and the people of the working-class own only their labour power to serve capitalist production (Cohen, 1968; Katz, 1993). For historian Beckett (2010), there are two classes of the bourgeoisie which include upper class and middle class. There appears to be no consensus for defining the term middle class. The middle class may be defined as entrepreneurs (Kharas, 2010), and those who are employed in “one of the professions” and have good social status (Beckett, 2010) based on their incomes and consumption (Banerjee & Duflo, 2008). The struggles of working-class labourers are usually against their capitalist employers and the struggle’s common purpose is to have higher wages and better working conditions (Das, 2012).

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels “predicted in 1848 that capitalism would spread to the entire world” (Sachs, 1999, p. 90). Capitalism has indeed evolved into a new stage and has spread across the world. This is now known as “global capitalism”. Sociologist Robinson (2012) assumes that global capitalism emerged in the 1940s. He bases his assumption on U.S President Harry Truman’s declaration in his 1949 “era of development” speech that stated “we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Gustavo Esteva, 1991, p. 7, cited in Robinson, 2012, p. 350). This speech reflects on the notion of extending capitalism and capitalist ideologies across the world and includes so-called “underdeveloped” countries. This is in line with other evidence, particularly the establishment of The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1944 in the US (Woods, 2014). These two institutions have been criticised for serving the US’s imperialism which undoubtedly helped the US to become the leading capitalist state after World War II (Mason, 2018). Political scientist Prempeh (2006) believes that the US achieved its leading global capitalist state through the close relationship imperialism has with global capitalism.

Robinson (2014, p. 14), asserts that global capitalism is “a qualitatively new stage in the open-ended evolution of capitalism characterised by the rise of transnational capital, a transnational capitalist class, and a transnational state”. He firstly examines how in this era of global capitalism “nations are linked to each [sic] more organically through the transnationalisation of the production process, of finance, and of the circuits of capital accumulation” (p. 14). Secondly, he notes the rise of a transnational capitalist class across the globe which “has attempted to position itself as a global ruling class” (p. 14). Thirdly, the rise of a transnational state is “a loose network made up of trans-, and supranational organisations together with national states” (p. 14). This transnational state “functions to organise the conditions for transnational accumulation” (p. 14) and that the “transnational capitalist class attempts to organise and institutionally exercise its class power through transnational state apparatuses” (p. 15).

Driven by the emergence of globalisation and technology, global capitalism has spread very fast across the globe in this connected world through the effective enforcement of a world capitalist agenda. Globalisation is believed to have this connection with capitalism by its very nature, which sociologist Oztimur (2007) asserts is how “globalisation is evaluated as a process that works against labour and the labourer, and strengthens the exploitation of labour” (p. 118). Globalisation is identified as having begun in the late 1980s by Prempeh (2006) and Sachs (1999). Acker (2004, p. 18) defines globalisation as “the increasing pace and penetrations of movements of capital, production, and people across boundaries of many kinds and on a global basis”. Similarly, political scientist Pippa Norris (2000, p. 155) asserts that “globalisation is understood as a process that erodes national boundaries, integrating national economies, cultures, technologies, and governance, producing complex relations of mutual interdependence” (cited in Prempeh, 2006, p. 20).

Today’s globalisation is seen by many scholars as “neoliberal globalisation”. Neoliberal globalisation is defined by theologian Sniegocki (2008, p. 322) as “a term used to describe the worldwide spread of an economic model emphasizing “free markets” and “free trade”. The critical issues related to these free markets and free trade is linked to policies, specifically state policies (Sniegocki, 2008). Sniegocki (2008, p. 322) asserts that while such state policies “have not consistently applied”, “neoliberal ideas have nonetheless dominated the rhetoric of global economic policy and much of its practice since the early 1980s”.

Global capitalism is inextricably linked to globalisation generally, and contemporary global capitalism is a critical issue for the Third World. The rise of capitalists and capitalism in the Third World in recent decades has social historian Mason (2018, p. 23) claiming that “capitalism everywhere is a single, globalized, phenomenon”. Moreover, Robinson (2012, p. 349) asserts that “globalization represents a new epoch in the ongoing evolution of world capitalism distinguished by the rise of a globally-integrated production and financial system, an emergent transnational capitalist class, and incipient transnational state apparatuses”. The emergence of globalisation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has constituted global capitalism which has rapidly spread from the First to the Third Worlds, driven by the capitalist elites in the Global North and the local capitalist elites in the Global South.

In this age of global capitalism, another phenomenon of a changing world is the evolution of finance capitalism. As part of the capitalist economic system, finance capitalism plays an important role in the capitalist world. Finance capitalism began in the early twentieth century and has continued to evolve into a new form of financialisation of contemporary economic systems since the 1980s (Davis, 2008; Hansen, 2014). Sociologist Davis (2008) asserts that theorists have defined the original conception of finance capitalism as a system “in which banks effectively controlled a large-scale industry” (p. 11). However, in their writings about the political paradox of finance capitalism, political scientists Cioffi and Hopner (2006) conceptualise contemporary finance capitalism as “an economic order characterized by increasing competition, the expansion and deepening of financial markets, and more extensive regulation of the corporate firm’s financial and governance practices consistent with the growth of market-driven finance” (p. 493). This means that the evolution of finance capitalism has entered into a new epoch in which banks are influenced by the financial markets.

## **2.2 Feminist Perspectives on Global Capitalism**

Since at least the start of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, women from all parts of the world have pursued their struggles to achieve gender equality and social justice for all in the context of global capitalism. Acker (2004) writes that “Feminist scholars have been producing research and theoretical reflections on women, gender, and global transformations at least since 1970” (p. 17). In this regard, capitalism, globalisation, and global capitalism have become significant topics of the research focus for analysing inequalities and how they impact women’s lives. Women’s labour exploitation, patriarchal systems and masculine-centric ways of working as well as how social reproduction is organised, are relevant under this focus. In

the existing literature, the many analyses of global capitalism pay little attention to gender. Nonetheless, in gendering the discourse of globalisation, Acker (2004) argues that “Gender processes and ideologies are embedded in globalizing capitalism in the separation of capitalist production and human reproduction and the corporate claims to non-responsibility for reproduction” (p. 17). This argument is at the centre of feminist discourse around how global capitalism impacts enormously on gender relations worldwide, especially how social reproduction is important for capitalist production. Capitalism and global capitalism have functioned to bring numerous negative impacts on women’s lives. Mason (2018) asserts that “Capitalism is by nature turbulent and destructive; its episodic shifts have inevitably been marked by convolutions and even revolutions” (p. x). Although globalization and global capitalism may have created jobs for women, generally those jobs are “low-paid, temporary or part-time, insecure, and without benefits” (Acker, p. 35). In addition, Acker (2004) states that “For some women, increased opportunity for paid employment may mean greater autonomy and equality in personal life, or avenues out of oppressive relationships” (Acker, 2004, p. 36). However, for many other women, opportunities for employment do not mean that they can take up opportunities to improve their lives. Many women still struggle to get involved in paid labour markets as work is still gendered and organised in masculine ways meaning there is a greater ‘load’ on women’s work. Acker (2004, p. 36) notes that for many women globalisation means “these changes lead to less security, greater difficulties in taking care of themselves and their families, and, perhaps, the necessity to remain in unsupportive or violent relationships with men”. In addition, Acker (2004) adds that the masculine way of work produces “a fundamental lack of fit with the more complex demands for nurturing and earning money of most women’s lives” (p. 36). In this regard, she asserts that women are seen to “have been subordinate in both domains, held responsible for unpaid reproductive labour and consigned to positions with less power and lower pay than men within the sphere of production” (Acker, 2004, p. 23). This issue lies within the realm of the gendered division of labour with women being marginalised and men reaping the benefits through patriarchal labour systems

Another feminist viewpoint about global capitalist processes and practices identifies the links to corporate firms and how they do not take responsibility for women’s reproductive labour. This means that despite the huge contributions that women’s labour makes to global world economies and capitalist markets, their social reproduction is still unrecognised and devalued, especially in developing countries. Philosopher Bernstein (2017) asserts that “economic production itself *presupposes* social reproduction” and “Social reproduction is an indispensable

background condition for the possibility of capitalist production” (p. 35). This clearly means that without this social reproduction, and particularly the reproductive labour of women, economic and capitalist production will fail. It is important at this stage to clearly define “social reproduction” from a feminist perspective as without distinguishing between the differing meanings, there can be some confusion. In this thesis, the following definitions by sociologists Laslett and Brenner (1989) will be used. These authors explain that “feminists use social reproduction to refer to the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally” (p. 382).

The debate about how the work of social reproduction performed by women plays a critical role in capitalist economic production is also at the core work of Italian-American Marxist feminist Silvia Federici. Federici (2019) asserts that women’s social reproduction plays a critical role in both the private and public spheres. In responding to women’s social reproduction work in the private sphere, Federici (2019) identified the rise of theorists, activists and women’s movements to advocate for wages for housework in the 1970s in order for the capitalist hegemonic and patriarchal society to recognise women’s housework as work. Although this specific movement has not lasted, the outcomes were significant. This helped to create a bond between women of different backgrounds across the globe and became a crucial point in feminist political thought (Federici, 2019; Thorburn, 2020). In the public sphere, Federici (2019) points to the importance of social reproduction for capitalism whereby she insists that “Placing the spotlight on the work that produces the workforce has made possible a new understanding of the mechanisms by which capitalist society has been reproduced” (p. 55).

Alongside the issue of social reproduction being critical to economic production and capitalist markets, feminist scholars also see the exploitation women have suffered from the effects of global capitalism. As discussed above, global capitalism and capitalist market seek to use human labour, paid as little as possible, to fulfil their aims. As researchers and sociologists Golash-Boza, Duenas and Xiong (2019, p. 1742) assert, “Global capitalism maximizes profit for capitalists through the exploitation of workers”. In addition, given the nature of capitalism becoming global, capitalists do not just exploit workers domestically but also internationally. Countless women in the Third World are in this situation or where, due to a lack of paid work in their own countries, they need to leave their country of origin to fill labour needs overseas where low-skilled jobs are available for them. Gibson, Law and McKey (2001) states that

“(Asian) women join their male contract worker counterparts and are positioned as part of a highly segmented new international proletariat, portrayed as the globalized workforce of the world capitalist economy” (p. 370). These proletarians or working-class women, along with men, travel to work overseas as “social mobility is premised on circulation in international labour markets” (Gibson, Law & McKey, 2001, p. 370). There are countless stories of female migrants being victims of exploitation and abuse throughout their migration journeys. These will be described and discussed in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

### **2.3 How Does Global Capitalism Work in Southeast Asia?**

Granting that capitalism has become a global phenomenon, it has already expanded from its origins in Western Europe and North America, to every corner of the world. The Southeast Asian region is no exception. This is because globalisation has opened a new epoch for local and transnational capitalists, to be more involved in world economies. In this respect, global capitalists who have sought cheap labour for economic production over the last several decades have targeted Southeast Asia. Acker (2004) asserts that “Processes paradigmatic of globalization, such as the search for the lowest wage women workers for clothing manufacturing, began much earlier in Southeast Asia in the 1960s” (p. 21). We might ask why capitalists specifically targeted Southeast Asia? The labour force of most countries in this region exceeded the needs of domestic labour markets as the numbers of people entering into the labour force increased annually. This left millions unemployed. For survival and a livelihood, millions have thus chosen to migrate in search of jobs overseas within and outside of Southeast Asia, especially to the wealthier nations. The increasing numbers of women and girls who have migrated to work in feminised sectors such as healthcare, domestic work, manufacturing, and textiles makes up to nearly fifty per cent of the total number of transnational migrants in Southeast Asia (UN WOMEN, ND). This excess labour force constituted of high unemployment rates and low-wage labour is indeed a favourite target of the capitalists.

### **2.4 Deglobalisation, Anti-Capitalist Movements and Women’s Participation in Class Struggles**

Capitalism has been endlessly criticised over the past few centuries. As capitalism has entered into a new epoch, global capitalism, the critiques have become even more acute. In addition, resistance to capitalism and global capitalist practices are seen to have intensified and been organised through specific movements. These movements, interestingly, have targeted not only the new capitalist development of the global economy but also globalisation. Political scientist

Prempeh (2006, p. 53) asserts that “Indeed, the rise of the deglobalisation and anti-capitalism movement constitutes one of the most politically important developments since the late 1990s” (p. 53) where multi-groups of activists in the Global North and Global South “have come together to form coalitions to resist globalization”. Deglobalisation in this context of the movement is referred to the “anti-neoliberal globalisation” (Prempeh, 2006, pp. 64). Prempeh (2006) clarifies that the deglobalisation movement is not a movement against globalisation per se but against corporate-led globalisation or neoliberal globalisation. He also mentions that “the objective of the anti-capitalist movement is not to reform but shut down the international financial institutions and provide a distinctively anti-capitalist alternative by reconstructing and realigning power relations to the benefit of grassroots and progressive democratic political movements” and “to build a more human-centred alternative to capitalism” (p. 65).

In Southeast Asia, the deglobalisation and anti-capitalist movement is believed to have begun at least several decades ago. Economist Artner (2004) writes that anti-globalisation movements in Southeast Asia have long emerged alongside with social movements in other parts of the world. She adds that these movements have become more visible and significant after the economic crisis in Southeast Asia in the late 1990s which was “a fertile ground for the resurgence and development of such movements” (p. 244). Artner (2004) gives one example of the anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation movement in Southeast Asia by pointing to a social movement in the Philippines in 1973 against two former Filipino presidents, Marcos and Estrada, for national freedom and democracy. This social movement formed as an alliance called National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) and their mission was also to resist “the dominance of the US and other foreign monopoly capitalists” (p. 244). As part of the anti-capitalism movement, in Southeast Asia movements and events against capitalist practice and exploitation have become common.

Furthermore, as an action against the class system, class struggles have continued and expanded across regions as a global labour class, due to ongoing capitalist expansion (Selwyn, 2013). Women and men alike have been victims of capitalist exploitation so women have also been part of the class struggle. While women have suffered not only exploitation but also oppression in patriarchal society, socialist Cliff (1984) asserts that the working-class women’s struggle against capitalist exploitation is essential for the struggle against oppression and women’s liberation. In this aspect, Cliff (1984) suggests that “the first step for working-class women in entering the arena of struggle for their liberation as women is to leave the isolation of the home and enter the social area of production” (p. 6). Cliff (1984), however, makes clear that his

suggestion for women to enter the production sphere is for women to be part of the class struggle for social change. This is because he agrees with Marxists that exploitation leads to a struggle.

## CHAPTER 3: EXISTING LITERATURE ON WOMEN AND MIGRATION

Migration has become a global phenomenon and has contributed to global economies and development in numerous ways. However, migration is indeed a complicated issue and over the past few decades it has elicited much debate among scholars. Generally, there are two types of migration including regular or documented and irregular or undocumented.

### 3.1. Women and International Migration

While the number of international migrants has increased generally in recent decades, the number of female migrants has consistently increased and accounts for almost half of all current international migrants (UN DESA, 2019). This increasing number of women and girls participating in labour migration (Varshney & Lata, 2014) has, since the 1980s (Fleury, 2016), attracted numerous researchers and scholars. The research has focused on the issues of the “feminisation of migration” (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Ruysen & Salomone, 2018; Varshney & Lata, 2014) and “gender and migration” (Chant, 1992; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Sweetman, 1998). The term “feminisation of migration” is defined by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) as a “trend towards an increasing proportion of women amongst international migrant workers”. Economists Ruysen and Salomone (2018) assert that “women already made up almost half of the migration stock several decades ago and their numbers have been steadily growing” (p. 224). This significant increase of women and girls in international migration or the emergence of a feminisation of migration has been well noted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021, p. 1). They claim three major reasons: first, “the demand for labour, especially in more developed countries, is becoming increasingly gender-selective in favour of jobs typically filled by women”; second, “changing gender relations in some countries of origin mean that women have more independence to work and migrate in greater numbers than was previously the case”; and third, “there has been a growth in the migration of women for domestic work, as well as in organized migration for marriage and the trafficking of women into the sex industry”. This view is similar to those of other scholars as well. For example, in her book *Gender and Migration*, British development studies researcher Sweetman (1998) asserts that “Both female and male migration for paid work is shaped by gender-based expectations of the types of work each sex should do” (p. 3). Additionally, a female migration expert Fleury (2016, p. 9) writes that “Gender segregation is common in the labor force, and when women migrate for work they often work in “feminine” positions. Gendered positions are based on the gender construct of feminine skills and roles. For example, the majority of

migrant domestic workers around the world in 2011 were women (Fleury, 2016). It seems female migrants end up in conventionally feminine occupations because of expectations in destination countries where their female citizens are unable or perhaps less willing to perform housework due to their involvement in the productive sphere.

The above pattern of migration does not represent the whole case as many women and girls do migrate to work in formal sectors, like most men do. The informal sector is usually not clearly delineated or protected under the labour laws and provisions while the formal sector, in contrast, is normally clearly identified and regulated under the labour laws and provisions. The types of sectors contribute to the levels of protection for migrants and how they are treated. (This will be further discussed in the last section of this chapter).

With the increasing numbers of international female migrant workers, the contributions made by women migrant workers to national and global economies have been significant. Varshney and Lata (2014) assert that “Like men, women also contribute through their labour and remittances when they migrate or through their reproductive and productive input when they are left behind” (p. 192). At the individual level, through the incomes generated from their migration work, “women can also benefit from opportunities for autonomy and empowerment” (Varshney & Lata, 2014, p. 192). This is because women then “become the principal wage earners for their families” (United Nations, 2004, cited in Ruysen & Salomone, 2018, pp. 224-225), especially among the increasing numbers of independent and single women migrants.

Although women migrants have contributed to the national economies of both countries of destination and origin, their contributions often come at a cost for themselves and their families. Family relationships have been fractured for women who migrate, creating mental distress among female migrants and negative effects on families left behind. Women who traditionally cared for children and are now on the move, often must leave children behind. These children may then receive inappropriate care and suffer emotional disruption, loneliness, and sadness (Nguyen et al., 2006). Many female migrants have also faced numerous challenges in their migration journeys which include exploitation and human rights violations (Varshney & Lata, 2014). Domestic work generally lacks legal protections and women who do this work often work for long hours with excessive responsibilities for cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children and elderly people. In the Middle East, for instance, the recent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in women working for longer hours than usual due to increased

demands and responsibilities, working without paid leave or having enough sleep and rest (Aoun, 2020).

### **3.2 Women and Migration in Southeast Asia**

Economically, Southeast Asia has one of the world's largest economies and it is predicted that by 2050 it will become the fourth biggest economy in the world (World Population Review, 2021). This region started its meaningful integration into the world's global economy in the 1970s (Kaur, 2010; Kaur & Metcalfe, 2006) due to the impact of globalisation. Among all countries in this region, Alston, Arsov, Bunny and Rickards (2018) assert that Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam have the "largest middle-income economies" (p. 1) while economic historian Kaur (2010) argues that "Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are Southeast Asia's economic development success stories and have been shifting towards an intra-regional bias on trade and migration matters" (p. 6). Through historic economic developments in this area, Southeast Asia has become one of the world's biggest host regions for international migrants. UN DESA (2019) estimates that, as of 2019, there were around 10 million international migrants living in Southeast Asia with 48 percent being female. It is also believed around 20 million migrants from Southeast Asia have been working outside of this region (Hugo, 2012).

The feminisation of migration in Southeast Asia became visible in the 1990s. Ananta and Arifin (2004) assert that "Women workers form a very significant part of the labour migration from Southeast Asia" (p. 167). Although exact figures about female migration remain unavailable, especially among irregular female migration, Varshney and Lata (2014) write that in 2014 Southeast Asia was the second largest host of female migrant workers among other sub-regions of Asia. Similar to male migrant workers, female migrant workers in Southeast Asia travel to the destination countries through facilitation by others including friends and relatives, illegal brokers and registered private recruitment agencies as well as government agencies (Ananta & Arifin, 2004).

Why have so many Southeast Asian women been on the move? Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2006) reveals that the increased number of women in regional migration flows is due to the increasing demands for women in the domestic work sector (cited in Larsen, 2010), while Kaur and Metcalfe (2006) assert that this increase in women's labour migration is "in response to the gender-selective policies of labour-importing countries and the emergence of gender-

specific employment niches” (p. 33). Kaur and Metcalfe (2006) suggest therefore that the feminisation of migration in Southeast Asia is linked to three important factors. Firstly, Kaur and Metcalfe (2006) refer to the “general changes in the labour markets” (p. 33) in which women are needed to fulfil labour demands in domestic jobs in urban areas. As the nature of these domestic jobs in their own country are mostly precarious, many women decide to migrate abroad to seek other employment opportunities (Kaur and Metcalfe 2006). Second, Kaur and Metcalfe (2006) point to “the maturing of the labour markets of Singapore and Malaysia” (p. 33) in which housework and childcare are put in the hands of female migrant workers from the poorer countries of Southeast Asia. Third, Kaur and Metcalfe (2006) link the feminisation of migration in Southeast Asia to “individual and family decisions” (p. 34). These authors explain that some women migrate independently while many others decide to migrate in order to ensure secure livelihoods and therefore survival of their families. This feminisation of migration has been a significant change of out-migration in Southeast Asia (Hugo, 2008, cited in Larsen, 2010). The vast majority of migrant workers including female migrant workers are undocumented, especially those who work in Thailand and Malaysia (Larsen, 2010). This often means that generally, the women who work as migrant domestic workers and entertainers face difficult conditions of exploitation and rights violations given their irregular legal status (Larsen, 2010) in the destination countries.

As the number of women made up almost half of the total number of labour migrants in Southeast Asia as of 2019 (UN ESCAP, 2019), the impacts of female migration have undeniably been significant in so many ways; to themselves, their families, and both countries of origin and destination. Successful female migrants may have positive impacts on their families through material benefits (Brooks & Simpson, 2013). These material benefits, Brooks and Simpson (2013) explain, include “better housing, regular financial support and payment for children’s education” (p. 74) in the home countries. In addition, sociologist and social scientist Fong and Shibuya (2020) assert that “remittances from female migrant workers are important for them in accumulating social capital back home, as they become key earners in the household” (p. 519). More importantly, Kusakabe and Pearson (2015, p. 519) assert that “females were more likely [than men] to remit money” and they explain that “these patterns reflect the gendered norm of obligation toward family” (cited in Fong & Shibuya, 2020). The economic contributions made by female migrant workers for both countries of origin and destination, although there is no specific data available, are estimated to be significant. So, we can see that the economic production of destination countries is increased by female migrant

workers despite female migrant workers being paid low wages (Yeoh, 2016), and the countries of origin gain huge benefits through billions of dollars in remittances every year (KNOMAD, 2020).

To observe that Southeast Asian female labour migrants have significantly contributed to the national economies of both the countries of origin and destination is also to observe that female labour migrants are central to the exploitative economic structure of Southeast Asia. In many cases, female labour migrants receive insufficient protection from both countries of origin and destination, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking in the countries of destination. Gibson, Law and McKay (2001), for example, have described the incidences of Filipino female domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong where for the duration of their contracts, “are [often] denied the freedom to change employers, are given little time off and experienced restricted personal freedom” (p. 371), are confined to the house, work very long hours and given little food to eat. Some suffer violence and abuse committed by the house owners. Gibson, Law and McKay (2001) depict them as “slaves” in this contemporary era. Brooks and Simpson (2013) assert that “Many female migrant domestic workers are at risk of workplace abuse and exploitation because of the isolated nature of their work and lack of legal protection” (p. 78). In addition, in their comparison of the overseas Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers in the destination countries, Ananta and Arifin (2004) assert that “almost all Filipino domestic workers received at least the minimum wage in 2001, but only half of the Indonesian domestic workers received the minimum wage” (p. 16). Ananta and Arifin (2004) add that the female domestic workers are not informed about the ‘minimum wage’ until after they sign contracts. This indeed shows the lack of honesty and integrity and the racial hierarchy in the migration process of female migrant workers. It also highlights their limited rights to access information. This subsequently constitutes labour exploitation and even trafficking in the latter stages. The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), a regional network of migrant support organisations, grassroots movements, and research institutes in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, reveals that “prospective migrants receive incomplete information on the social protection schemes available in destination countries during compulsory pre-departure training/orientation” (MMN, 2019, p. ix). Moreover, Ananta and Arifin (2004) assert that the vulnerability and exploitation of Southeast Asian labour migrants can also be caused or constituted by the “corruption and collusion between government officials and business persons” (p. 25) that facilitates sending migrant workers abroad. This is not limited to the countries of destination, but also to the vulnerability and exploitation of labour migrants,

especially female labour migrants which can happen throughout the stages of migration – pre-departure, departure, arrival, post-arrival and return. These labour migrants, particularly female labour migrants, are often from poor family backgrounds in the poor countries who are generally pushed out of their countries to work abroad due to poverty and unemployment (Gibson et al., 2001). Additionally, these push-factor labour migrants come from unfortunate backgrounds compared to the pull-factor labour migrants who generally have higher skills and education. For example, Ananta and Arifin (2004), in their comparative analysis of Filipino and Indonesian labour migrants in Hong Kong, point out the better working and living conditions Filipino labour migrants in Hong Kong experience, asserting they are luckier than those who are low-skilled workers. “The Filipinos have better education, speak English and hence they have higher wages and greater autonomy of choice and decision-making” (p. 16). Both push-factor and pull-factor labour migrants and male and female labour migrants will therefore need different attention and solutions to address transnational labour migration in Southeast Asia when formulating policies and legislation by policy and law makers.

### **3.3 Women and Transnational Migration in Cambodia**

Transnational migration of Cambodians is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it started a number of decades ago, but this labour migration issue has only recently received greater attention from policy-makers, organisations, and development practitioners (UN ESCAP, 2007). However, the existing literature on Cambodian women’s labour migration is still limited. Although there is some literature, research studies and reports about Cambodian women’s labour migration, the focus is often on the issue of female migration per se. It lacks analysis in the broader context of female migration in the global capitalism era. Historically, evidence shows that the Cambodian government started to send its nationals to work abroad as labour migrant workers in the mid-1990. Labour migration specialists Tunon and Rim (2013) estimated that annually, by 2013, around 250,000 to 300,000 Cambodian adults entered the labour force. This new labour force may have left Cambodia to work abroad due to the limited employment opportunities in Cambodia, poverty, and the availability of jobs and higher pay rates in the countries of destination (Tunon & Rim, 2013; World Food Programme, 2019). It is estimated that the more recent number of overseas Cambodian migrant workers would be over one million by 2019 (ILO, 2019; MMN, 2019; NCCT<sup>1</sup>, 2018). The primary destination for Cambodian migrants is Thailand and other major destinations are South Korea, Japan,

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<sup>1</sup> This source is in Khmer language. English version is currently unavailable. All English translation is my own.

Malaysia and Singapore through Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and bilateral agreements between Cambodia and these countries (ILO, 2019; Tunon & Rim, 2013). The other destinations include Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Hong Kong. Notably, in 2019, overseas Cambodian migrant workers sent an estimated amount of US\$1.58 billion into Cambodia and this amount of remittances represented around 5.9 per cent of its total GDP (KNOMAD, 2020).

The patterns of Cambodia's out-migration consist of regular and irregular migration. While regular migration is normally arranged by the registered private recruitment agencies (PRAs<sup>2</sup>) and the government, irregular migration is often facilitated by illegal brokers (these brokers are unlicensed individuals who often smuggle migrants across borders illegally) (UN ESCAP, 2007). The private recruitment agencies are regulated under Cambodia's labour legislation and policies and are authorised to recruit, train and send Cambodian people to work abroad.

Cambodian women and girls have also taken part in cross-border migration. The number of Cambodian female migrant workers who have crossed the border to work abroad has statistically increased from year to year. In the past, women and girls tended to stay home and it was culturally and socially believed that it was not good for women and girls to leave home for study, work or adventure. In recent decades Cambodian women and girls have broken out of this cultural and social norm by journeying out of their homes to seek employment and better lives (Tunon & Rim, 2013; UN ESCAP, 2007). A significant proportion of these women and girls have migrated out of Cambodia to seek improvement in their personal wellbeing as well as for their families. Tunon and Rim (2013) assert that the feminisation of Cambodian female migration is "largely due to increased demand for women in domestic work and in the manufacturing sectors, coupled with changing societal trends that allow women to migrate independently" (p. 5). In this assertion, Tunon and Rim (2013) point to Thailand and Malaysia as destination countries that increased their demand for women in domestic work and in the manufacturing sectors.

The types of jobs that Cambodian male and female migrant workers do are gendered. Many researchers have asserted that while male migrant workers often work in fishing, construction, agriculture and manufacturing sectors, female migrant workers tend to work in service sectors such as domestic work and restaurants (MMN, 2019; Tunon & Rim, 2013; UN ESCAP, 2007;

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<sup>2</sup> This acronym is made by the author for the use only in this thesis.

World Food Programme, 2019). The statistics gathered from different sources published on the factsheet of ILO (2019) have revealed that the number of Cambodian documented female migrant workers working in the major destinations of migration in Southeast Asia is high. In Thailand, as of May 2018, Cambodian female migrant workers represented around 42 per cent of the total number of Cambodian migrant workers who had migrated through legal channels and in Malaysia, as of March 2017, the number of Cambodian female migrant workers was around 77 per cent of the total Cambodian migrant workers in Malaysia (ILO, 2019). In Singapore, as of January 2016, the first group of Cambodian migrant workers consisted of 400 all-female workers (ILO, 2019). This first batch of Cambodian female migrant workers sent to work in Singapore, were under the pilot labour sending-receiving program between the two governments due to the increasing demand for domestic work in Singapore. It should be noted that generally, Cambodian female migrant workers are more vulnerable than their male counterparts in the migration process. UN ESCAP (2007) asserts that female migrant workers “are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation due to gender-based discrimination and their having a lower set of skills and knowledge”, compared with men (p. 6). This has made Cambodian female migrant workers vulnerable to becoming victims of labour exploitation and human trafficking, particularly in the countries of destination.

## **CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF CAMBODIAN FEMALE LABOUR MIGRANTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM**

The significant increase of attention towards labour migration (including gender and migration) began in mid-2014 after a mass exodus of more than 220,000 Cambodian migrants from Thailand back to Cambodia. This was due to the fear of severe crackdowns on undocumented migrants in Thailand (MMN, 2014). This increase in attention is one of the reasons that my analysis of the situation of Cambodian female migrants in this thesis targets the reports from 2015 to the present. As this thesis focuses on female migration in the contemporary period, I decided to choose only the reports, media news and research studies produced or published in the period of 2015-2021 for analysis with information about migrant women's specific situations, collected from these sources. This includes seven research studies/surveys, 13 program/project reports and six media news reports. Of the seven research studies/surveys, four were produced by UN agencies and the other three by the regional network working on migration issues in the Greater Sub-Mekong region. Of the 13 program reports, seven were produced by UN agencies, two by the local non-government organisations (NGOs), three by International NGOs, and one by the NCCT. Of the six media news stories, four were published by the local news agencies and two by the international news agencies

This chapter will explore the situation of Cambodian female labour migrants in contemporary times who have crossed borders to work in three countries in Southeast Asia, namely Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. These are all countries of destination in Southeast Asia, with Thailand as the major destination. The first country Cambodian migrants travelled to work to was Thailand in 1996 (IOM, 2019b) and the second was Malaysia in 1998 (UN ESCAP, 2007).

The following outlines the situation for Cambodian female migrant workers during all stages of migration: pre-departure, arrival and post-arrival, and return and reintegration. This includes both regular and irregular migration.

### **4.1 The Situation of Cambodian Female Labour Migrants in Southeast Asia:**

#### **Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore**

##### **4.1.1 Pre-Departure Stage**

Cambodian women and girls decide to migrate to work abroad for various reasons. In an assessment conducted by IOM in Cambodia released in 2016, Koenig (2016), found that the vast majority of the 355 female migrant workers interviewed (53% of the total

respondents) migrated to work in Thailand due to three key reasons: “no job, low income, and financial debt” (p. 8). Among these reasons, “no job” or “no income at all” was the top reason for female workers to migrate. These migrant workers are mostly from agricultural households and are generally low-skilled workers (OECD, 2017). Their husbands or family members accompanied most of the female migrant workers on their migration journey. In addition, most of the female migrant workers who had returned home had been facilitated to migrate to work in Thailand by illegal brokers through informal channels (Koenig, 2016).

There is no exact number available on how many Cambodian women leave the country each year to work abroad. However, in 2018, 41,599 Cambodian women migrated to work abroad through legal channels (NCCT, 2018). Of these 41,599 women, 38,680 migrated to work in Thailand. According to a report published in 2019 by IOM, besides Thailand, there has been a significant demand for Cambodian women to work in Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea in domestic work and the manufacturing sector (Zimmer & Natta, 2015, cited in IOM, 2019a). The report states that Cambodian women accounted for 87% of all Cambodian migrant workers in Malaysia from 2000 to 2012 with 75% working as domestic workers (p. 47). In 2018 alone, 287 Cambodian women migrated to work in Singapore and three other women migrated to Malaysia (NCCT, 2018). Additionally, as of 2018, a total of 499,070 Cambodian female migrant workers worked outside of Cambodia with legal documents, with 458,027 Cambodian female migrant workers working in Thailand, 25,872 working in Malaysia and 831 working in Singapore (MoLVT, 2018).

The majority of Cambodian migrants do so through informal channels, particularly to Thailand, as it is much cheaper and faster compared to migration managed by licensed brokers through formal channels (Koenig, 2016). According to Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020, a Cambodian migrant pays between US\$34 to US\$138 to an unlicensed broker to be facilitated to cross the Cambodia-Thailand border to work in Thailand. This compares to around US\$700 through legal channels arranged by registered private recruitment agencies (UN ESCAP, 2020). In addition, the 2018 annual report of Cambodia’s NCCT shows that in 2018 the registered private recruitment agencies in Cambodia had recruited and sent a total of 38,680 Cambodian female migrant workers to work in Thailand, three female migrant workers to work in Malaysia, and 287 female migrant workers to work in Singapore (NCCT, 2018). In Thailand, this number of documented Cambodian migrants is very small compared to those who have crossed the Cambodia-Thailand border to work without legal documents (which includes without a

passport) (Koenig, 2016). The issue of undocumented migration in Malaysia has also been noted. According to a spokesman from Cambodia's MoLVT, it is estimated that around 40% of 25,149 Cambodian migrant workers in Malaysia as of December 2020 were undocumented (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020a). In its research project about social protection across borders, the MMN report (2019) indicates that a joint survey conducted by IOM and ILO found that "less than one-third of Cambodian migrants move abroad through formal channels" (p. 16). It is explained in the Thailand migration report 2019 that "The primary reasons for migrants using informal channels include greater trust, ease of use, flexibility and accessibility" (UNICEF, 2019, p. 14). In its 2017 research study, MMN (2017) asserted that the decision not to migrate through regular channels or the so-called MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) process is generally related to time and cost. A migrant worker needs to wait for months to get the legal migration documents with expensive service charges by recruitment agencies. A female Cambodian migrant worker was quoted as saying:

*Coming to work in Thailand through the MOU was such a complicated process; it required too much paperwork and was even more expensive than paying a broker." – Female Cambodian migrant worker, 38 years old, currently employed in a factory in Rayong, Thailand (MMN, 2017, p. 30).*

The fee to migrate legally to work in Malaysia is around US\$840 to US\$1,200 while the monthly wage for a migrant domestic worker is around US\$165 to US\$200 (IDWFED, 2015; Tunon & Rim, 2013). Information about migration fees for Cambodian migrant workers, women and men, to work in Singapore could not be found; however, a BBC news agency reports that private recruitment agencies charge excessive fees to migrant workers to work in Singapore and rank from US\$1,100 to US\$11,000 (BBC, 2020).

In terms of access to migration information it is reported that an overwhelming number of Cambodian migrants do not receive information about legal and safe migration prior to their migration journey (Koenig, 2016; MMN, 2017). The lack of information about safe migration is believed to put migrant workers, especially female migrant workers, in risky situations. This is particularly so for migration through informal or irregular channels, with many migrants falling into exploitative and trafficking situations. This will be described in the next section.

Another consequence of the situation for women is that the family relationship between female migrants and their families left behind is fractured and children may receive inappropriate care leaving them with emotional disruption, loneliness and sadness (Nguyen, et al., 2006). A study conducted by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2017 revealed that in Cambodia many children aged under 15 are very likely to be left behind by their migrating parents (UNICEF, 2017). The same study states that “children [left behind] suffered from a range of negative emotional and psychological impacts due to migration, including the disruption of relationships between parents and children” (p. 11). The report describes how their older grandparents, especially grandmothers, generally care for these children with this being a huge burden given their age and can eventually cause physical and mental exhaustion (UNICEF, 2017).

#### **4.1.2 Arrival and Post-Arrival Stage**

The IOM’s 2016 assessment report about the Cambodian migrant workers returned from Thailand shows that the vast majority of 355 returned Cambodian female migrant workers interviewed had worked in construction, factory and agricultural work in Thailand (Koenig, 2016). Another research study on the impacts of social exclusion of migrants in Thailand conducted by MMN in 2016 states that “Migrant women also tend to work in occupations which have isolated job sites, such as garment factories and domestic work” (MMN, 2016, p. 14). In Malaysia, the majority (84%) of Cambodian women worked as domestic workers between 2009-2010 and the rest worked as general workers in other sectors such as industry (Tunon & Rim, 2013). In Singapore, all Cambodian female migrant workers have worked as domestic workers (MoLVT, 2018).

Another study on the impacts of social exclusion of migrants in Thailand conducted by MMN in 2016 shows that women received less pay than men ranging from between US\$1 to US\$3 per hour less for the same work (e.g. construction work) (MMN, 2016). Additionally, a report jointly produced by IOM based in Thailand and Thailand’s Chulalongkorn University reveals that more than 40% of women migrant workers working in Thailand received less than the Thai national minimum wage (IOM, 2019b). Koenig’s (2016) assessment also reveals that female migrant workers received lower incomes compared to male migrant workers

A study conducted by International Domestic Worker Federation in 2015 to analyse the situation of Cambodian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia and Singapore found that

around “30-40% of the women were not treated very well” while 20-30% of the other women “were severely exploited, physical [sic] abused and/or mistreated without regard for their basic human rights” (IDWFED, 2015, pp. 5-6).

Twenty percent of the interviewees in Koenig’s report experienced exploitation and abuse while working in Thailand with much higher numbers of female migrant workers who were victims than males (Koenig, 2016). The report gives a long detailed list of the features of exploitation and abuse such as “forced labour, excessive working hours, withholding of wages, withholding of identity and/or travel documents, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and denying of freedom to move” (Koenig, 2016, p. 9). This is echoed by the findings of research conducted by the MMN in 2017 which states that in Thailand “migrant workers continue to live a precarious existence where exploitation and abuse is commonplace throughout the migration cycle” (MMN, 2017, p. 6). These migrant workers included Cambodian female migrant workers as the research focused on migrant workers from both Cambodia and Myanmar working in Thailand.

The issue of exploitation of Cambodian female migrant domestic workers has also been discussed by news agencies. For example, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics reports that four Cambodian female domestic workers in Singapore who were assisted by their organisation in 2014 experienced “verbal, physical and financial abuse”. These workers could not speak English well like many other Cambodian female domestic workers working in Singapore (Soezean, 2017, p. 1). Also, a program officer of CENTRAL, a labour rights organisation in Cambodia, was quoted in the *Khmer Times* English news, stating that it is extremely difficult for migrant workers in Malaysia or maybe in other destination countries to seek justice when they are exploited or abused given their undocumented status, (*Khmer Times*, 2019). He also adds that many female migrant domestic workers returned to Cambodia with mental health problems as they suffered from violence while working in Malaysia. In addition, *The Phnom Penh Post* wrote on its online news page on 5 October 2020 about two Cambodian female domestic workers who suffered exploitation and abuse from their Malaysian employers – one was allegedly hit by her employer and another was forced to work very long hours and was given very little food to eat (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 2020b).

Migration through informal channels can also bring formal consequences. In 2018, a total of 31,536 undocumented Cambodian migrants (11,030 were females) were arrested and deported back to Cambodia by Thai authorities and 57 undocumented Cambodian migrants

were also deported back from Malaysia (the number of female migrants was not mentioned) (NCCT, 2018). Many Cambodian undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia, women and men, may have first migrated through legal channels but then became undocumented due to various factors. For example, some migrants originally went to Malaysia on tourist visas and stayed on, the employment visas of some migrant workers expired, and some migrant workers ran away from their employers (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 2020a). This makes it clear that it is not only the female migrant workers who used informal channels who have faced difficulties and are vulnerable, but the women who have migrated through formal channel have also encountered problems.

It is evident that, among Cambodian migrants, female domestic migrant workers are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Cambodia's NCCT 2018 annual report indicates that there were 64 victims of cross-border human trafficking (it is believed that the majority of them were women due to the nature of detailed human trafficking cases in the report) admitted in 2018 (NCCT, 2018). Also, in 2020 alone ADHOC, a human rights group in Cambodia, had received 19 cases of human trafficking involving 31 victims of whom 17 were women and girls (ADHOC, 2020). Of these cases, 9 were from Thailand and 10 from Malaysia. Human trafficking is a serious form of exploitation and a gross human rights violation of female migrants.

There may be some specific factors related to the laws and policies of destination countries that perpetuate the vulnerability of female migrant workers. In its report, MMN (2016) describes that although migrant workers are eligible to receive minimum wages, decent working conditions and a day-off under Thai laws; in reality it is rare for migrant workers to enjoy those entitlements. This is because these laws only partly cover those who work in informal sectors such as domestic work, where women represent the vast majority of workers (MMN, 2016).

### ***Remittances***

As mentioned previously, remittances sent to their families in Cambodia by migrant workers are significant. The World Bank estimates that in 2019 Cambodia received roughly US\$1.58 billion of remittances from Cambodian migrants working abroad (KNOMAD, 2020). Half of these remittances were sent from Thailand (UN DESA, 2020). These remittances have contributed to roughly 5.9% of Cambodia's total GDP (KNOMAD, 2020). An interesting point for further analysis is that when remitting through formal

channels (bank transfers and internet banking systems), the World Bank (2020) calculated that the service charges of transferring money through formal channels from Thailand to Cambodia was in average of 11.75% of the total amount transferred as of the last quarter of 2020. Information could not be found about the service charges of remitting money from Malaysia and Singapore to Cambodia. Although sending remittances from the destination countries to Cambodia through legal channels is safer, the majority of Cambodian migrants, female and male, often send their money through informal channels. This may be because sending money through legal channels is more expensive than through informal channels. For example, in Thailand, sending money through informal agents costs only around 7.6 per cent (Deelen & Vasuprasat, 2010). Also, many Cambodian migrant workers cannot access formal bank services due to barriers such as not having documents (i.e. identity documents such as passports), and this is especially the case for undocumented migrant workers.

#### **4.1.3 Return and Reintegration Stage**

The migration experience does not end when migrants return home. “Female migrants were more likely than male migrants to have mental health concerns” (Koenig, 2016, p. 9). This is one of the findings in the assessment conducted by IOM in Cambodia of returned Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand through the mass returns of 2014. Sadly, not many of these female migrant workers decided to seek medical treatment due to financial barriers (Koenig, 2016). In terms of the return of Cambodian female migrant domestic workers from Malaysia and Singapore, a study conducted by the International Domestic Worker Federation in 2015 found that only 5% of the returned women “were provided with any information about available services in Cambodia including health, legal, employment, financial and social services, upon their return to Cambodia” (IWDFED, 2015, p. 7). This means 95% had no information about available and necessary services as returning migrants, such as health and employment. In any case, the availability of the services given by the Cambodian government is very limited. A study conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2017 claims that “Domestically, there are no special government services for migrants and their families at any stage of the migration process. The responsibilities of local government bodies are very limited” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 16). The same study states that the majority of social supports and services for migrant returnees, especially for children affected by migration, have instead been provided by local and international non-government organisations.

## **4.2 Critical Analysis of the Situation of Overseas Cambodian Female Migrant Workers in Southeast Asia: Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore**

Although academic literature on the feminisation of Cambodia's migration and reports available about gender and cross-border migration are limited, the above extracts and descriptions of the experiences of Cambodian female migrants working in Southeast Asia in the countries of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore can be read specifically as evidence of the impact of global capitalism, and then both directly and indirectly, on the lives of Cambodian female migrants. I will therefore identify four ways in which the situation of Cambodian women migrants can be understood in the bigger picture.

First, the feminisation of migration is a strategy of global capitalism to profit by using the cheap labour of women and girls to increase production. In his writing about the impacts of capitalism on the lives of rural Indian women, geographer Das (2012) asserts that the capitalists increasingly turn to hiring women as they believe many rural Indian women are more likely to accept low wages and less satisfactory working conditions than men. Although this tendency of women to accept low wages and less satisfactory working conditions downplays the structural constraints women face in finding and accepting jobs and is not true in general, it can be the case in some specific patterns of migration for jobs. Cambodian female migrants, both regular and irregular migrants, who have taken the journey for employment in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in both formal and informal sectors, have experienced labour exploitation by receiving low wages. In many cases their wages are also below the minimum wages set by host countries like Thailand and even less than male migrant workers who do the same work (MMN, 2016) providing evidence that Das's claim (2012) is true. The intersection of gender and (irregular) migration status makes women even more vulnerable to labour exploitation such as receiving very low wages. Furthermore, it is believed that much of the production and business in Thailand and Malaysia has involved not only local capitalists but multi-national capitalists (foreign owned firms, foreign investors and foreign product distributors) who have always sought to benefit from low wage workers from Third World nations like Cambodia to serve as their labour force. The cooperation and collusion between local capitalists and transnational capitalists is also a strategy of global capitalism; gaining benefits from people's labour across borders. Robinson (2014) calls this transnational capital and characterises it as one of the features of global capitalism.

Second, the rise of global capitalism has created and perpetuated transnational class stratification, particularly in domestic labour. Poor women and girls like Cambodian female domestic migrant workers sacrifice their labour and freedom to serve middle-class families, including middle-class women, in the richer nations in Southeast Asia. This clearly means that global capitalism has created a series of class divisions in Southeast Asia that are based on nationality and ethnicity. In this era of global capitalism, national boundaries are no longer an obstruction to accessing cheaper labour such as the case of Cambodian female migrant workers who have travelled across the borders to work in other countries within and beyond Southeast Asia. Migrant domestic workers do the housework on behalf of the house owners so they have time to work in the productive sphere of capitalism. In capitalist societies, reproduction work is devalued so the women who do this work are also devalued (Acker, 2004) and this leads to the subordination of reproduction work to production work (Viajar, 2017). The reproduction work that Cambodian female migrant domestic workers do is devalued, even though it has contributed indirectly to the increase of production in the productive sphere (Bernstein, 2017). Cambodian women's work thus contributes to the social advancement of their female employers in wealthier countries like Malaysia, Singapore and even Thailand.

Third, the above extracted information from the reports shows that the financial institutions which underpin financial capitalism have played their roles in Southeast Asia and have gained benefits from the labour of Cambodian migrant workers through the transfer of remittances across the borders. KNOMAD (2020) estimates that in 2019 overseas Cambodian migrant workers sent around US\$1.58 billion to Cambodia. However, Cambodian MoLVT (2018<sup>3</sup>) estimates that in 2018 the amount of remittances could be higher, around US\$2.3 billion based on the standard wages of the destination countries. Of this amount, MoLVT (2018) states that US\$1.9 billion was sent from Thailand, US\$50 million from Malaysia and US\$2 million from Singapore (p. 9). The contribution of Cambodian female migrant workers to this total amount of remittances is very significant because female migrant workers accounted for around 41% of the estimated 1.2 million overseas Cambodian documented migrants in 2018 (MoLVT, 2018, p. 9). The World Bank (2020) calculates that remittances sent through formal channels such as banks and internet banking from Thailand is charged at around 11.75% (this calculation was as of the fourth quarter of 2020). This means that Cambodian migrant workers are charged over two hundred million US dollars for the transfer of remittances every year. (Information

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<sup>3</sup> This document is currently available in Khmer version. English version of this document is still in draft. All English translations are my own.

about transfer charges from Malaysia and Singapore is unavailable). This does not include other amounts of money sent back home by the Cambodian migrant workers through informal channels. The banks, financial firms, and local money transferrers have gained huge benefits without having to work hard like migrant workers. These benefits can be characterised as a feature of contemporary financial capitalism conceptualised by Cioffi and Hopner (2006) “an economic order characterized by increasing competition, the expansion and deepening of financial markets” (p. 493). The banks and financial firms play very critical roles in this system of financial capitalism. They do not need direct involvement with people’s labour for these benefits. Instead, they receive a proportion of the earnings of migrant workers such as Cambodian female migrant workers through moving money across borders using competitive fees. It is also an economic system of the global capitalist world.

Fourth, the Cambodian government has long included labour migration as a national strategy to address unemployment and alleviate the poverty of Cambodian people (Human Rights Watch, 2011) and more importantly, for “national economic development”. There is no doubt that the Cambodian government looks at the amount of remittances sent back to Cambodia every year as an important source, contributing meaningfully into the Cambodian GDP. But, to what extent does this national economic development benefit the Cambodian female migrant workers and their families? Labour migration of Cambodian women and girls has come at a great cost. Many Cambodian female migrant workers continue to face numerous challenges including exploitation, abuse, trafficking, and health issues and so on, and the impacts of their migration affects not only themselves but their families left behind.

Another factor, based on the above extracts, is that many Cambodian female migrant workers did not receive proper protection or assistance from the countries of destination or origin. This means it is extremely difficult for Cambodian female and male migrants to seek help when needed. In addition, there are no Cambodian government services or supports available upon return of the Cambodian migrants. There are however, some specific services to support female migrant returnees and victims of human trafficking by NGOs (MMN, 2017; UNICEF, 2017). The ‘national development’ through migrants’ remittances claimed by the Cambodian government is uneven however, whereby female migrant workers are less likely to receive any meaningful share of this national development. The evidence clearly shows that Cambodian women who migrate out of their country often face many difficulties, even risk their lives and personal safety. Their leaving also poses numerous difficulties for their children and families left behind as described above. Sometimes, they return home with physical and mental damage;

however they receive very little support from the government. It is grossly unfair when they have in fact greatly contributed to the so-called “national development” of Cambodia. “National development” therefore turns out to actually be hyper-exploitation of Cambodian migrant workers, where they pay heavily for their own survival and that of their families. Greater exploitation exists in the case of Cambodian female migrants (and also male migrants) who have migrated through irregular channels, where their personal safety is often in danger at the hands of illegal brokers and employers. Additionally, they are also subjected to arrest, detainment and deportation by the authorities of the destination countries regarding their undocumented status.

### ***Resistance***

But Cambodian female labour migrants have not been passive objects of exploitation. In the face of exploitation and abuse committed by employers at the destination countries, Cambodian female migrant workers have taken action to resist and struggle to improve their living and working conditions. This is a form of anti-capitalist struggle in the era of global capitalism. The struggle to increase wages and improve working conditions is described by Das (2012) as a form of class struggle. Against the background of low monthly wages (of between US\$160 to US\$200) that the Cambodian female domestic workers received in Malaysia (IDWFED, 2015; Tunon & Rim, 2013) the cases of being forced to work long hours with little time to rest and little food to eat (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020b) and the lack of protection from the Malaysian government (and perhaps lack of effective protection from the Cambodian government), Cambodian female domestic workers, along with other foreign domestic workers, have joined trade unions in Malaysia, such as MTUC, to fight for the increase of wages and for protection and improvement of working conditions (Viajar, 2017). In Thailand, both male and female, Cambodian migrant workers have organised protests against their employers for the increase of benefits and improvement of working conditions. A Cambodian local independent media VOD reported that in November 2020 around 500 Cambodian migrant workers protested against a food production company in Chon Buri province, Thailand (VOD, 2020). This protest was against the company that reduced their wages, refused to pay for the repairs of their accommodation, and forced them to buy high priced food at the company store (VOD, 2020). As a result of the protest, the company agreed to negotiate with the Cambodian migrant workers about the price of food at the company store and about wages (VOD, 2020).

Resistance and action by migrants is obviously important. One very good example is when more than 220,000 Cambodian migrants left Thailand in just a two-week period following the

mass exodus in 2014 (Koenig, 2016; MMN, 2014; The Diplomat, 2014). This sudden departure was due to the rumours of harsh crackdowns on Cambodian migrants' communities in Thailand, especially on undocumented Cambodian migrants, by the military junta who ousted the then Thai elect-government through a military coup (MMN, 2014). In its study, MMN (2014) states that this mass exodus is "one of the largest mass movements of people in Southeast Asia since the 1970s" (p. 7). The return of the Cambodian migrants caused a powerful impact on the Thai economy with many Thai businesses suffering closures, slowdowns and losses in the absence of Cambodian migrant workers. Based on my experience working with migrant returnees during the mass return, I saw that some of the returnees fled Thailand back to Cambodia during this mass exodus because they were angry about the raids and crackdowns by the Thai military junta. They also predicted that Thai businesses would suffer from this sudden return of Cambodian migrants. To cope with this crisis and to respond to the cries of the business owners towards the military junta, the ruling Thai government introduced a number of swift policy reforms to allow (and even attract) Cambodian migrants to return (MMN, 2014). One of the reforms was to make legal migration easily accessible; for example, the returned Cambodian migrants could get legal documents to work in Thailand from one-stop service centres across Thailand, including several centres which opened near the Thai-Cambodia border (MMN, 2014). This example can prove the interdependency between migrant workers and the Thai economy and that the migrant workers' rights should be respected and protected and their contributions should be highly valued.

In summary, women's labour migration is obviously important, not just for the survival of the female migrants themselves and their families, but for the so-called "national development". The case of Cambodia's female labour migration can well prove this. Labour migration of Cambodian women can come at great cost including exploitation and abuse. While there are some published reports about Cambodian female migrants' exploitation they more often discuss specific issues related to the cases of exploitation or analyse the issues at micro levels. They do not offer the bigger picture of the issue related to exploitation. The bigger picture can be linked to the notions of the nature of "national development" and the interests of global capitalists and local elites. As mentioned earlier, the Cambodian government claims that remittances from Cambodian migrants working abroad have contributed to "national development", but in reality this national development is uneven and does not really benefit Cambodian migrant workers and their families. In many cases Cambodian migrant workers including female migrant workers return home with physical and mental damage caused by their migration and receive very little support from the Cambodian government. It is even

harder to receive these meagre supports if they have migrated through irregular channels. It appears therefore that the sacrifices of the Cambodian migrant workers, female and male, for the “national development” mean almost nothing. This contradicts with the claim by the Cambodian government that migrant workers are important and that they are treated as such (MoLVT, 2018). In addition, female labour migration is situated firmly in the interests of global capitalists and local elites. The global capitalists often seek to hire the cheap labour of female migrants for the benefits of their businesses. This is clear in the case of low-skilled Cambodian female migrant workers hired by Thai, Malaysian and Singaporean business owners and employers. Also, female migration benefits local elites (who own PRAs in Cambodia) through extreme service charges to facilitate the migration of Cambodian women through formal channels. There is no publicly available evidence about who the owners of those PRAs are, however, there are rumours that many PRA owners are those who are or have close relationship with high-ranking officials in the Cambodian government. Even illegal brokers who are criminals benefit from the migration of Cambodian women through smuggling them across borders, particularly to neighbouring Thailand.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE ANALYSIS OF CAMBODIA’S LABOUR MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM**

Although the movement of labour is a global process it is partly regulated by nation states that are significant source and host countries. These countries enact and implement national policies, legislation and regulations to support the sending and receiving of migrant labour, often, it is said, for the benefit of their national economies. This notion of “the national economy” needs to be questioned. This chapter will look at the developments of Cambodia’s labour migration legislation and policies and analyse how these have impacted the lives of Cambodian female labour migrants in the era of global capitalism.

### **5.1 Overview of Cambodia’s Labour Migration Policies**

For the purpose of managing and governing Cambodian labour migration, Cambodia adopted a number of legislative measures and policies and created a number of MoUs as well as bilateral agreements with countries of destination. These include Sub-decree, Ministerial Orders (so-called Prakas), Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia (PLMC), MoUs and Bilateral Agreements. It is important to have an understanding of the purposes of these labour migration policies and regulations and to have full awareness of their effects. An important question is whether these measures really protect and are beneficial for migrant workers, especially female migrant workers.

The following descriptions and discussions of the legislation, policies, and other labour migration instruments are as described by the government. However, this does not necessarily match the way the government behaves in reality, nor does it truly reflect the effects of the legislation, policies, and those regulations.

#### **5.1.1 Sub-decree**

Sub-decree and various relevant Prakas govern Cambodia’s formal labour migration. The first Cambodian labour migration policy was Sub-Decree 57 on Sending Khmer Migrants to Work Abroad (Open Development Mekong, 2016)<sup>4</sup>. This Sub-decree was issued on 23 July 1995 and was used for almost 15 years before a new Sub-decree was enacted in 2011. It contained a total of 22 articles and gave authority to three different ministries, namely Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour, and Veteran’s Affairs (later on changed to Ministry of

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<sup>4</sup> This source is in Khmer language. English version is currently unavailable. All English translation is my own.

Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT)), Ministry of Interior (MoI), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFA) in order to implement and oversee the implementation of the Sub-decree.

The recruitment of Cambodian migrant workers, according to the Sub-decree 57, should be in the hands of PRAs. These agencies are authorised to recruit, train and send Cambodian migrant workers to work abroad. An agency needs to first register with the Ministry of Commerce as a registered company. Then, in order to be able to get authorised to recruit, train and send Cambodian citizens to work abroad, the company (or agency) needs to apply for a license from the MoLVT through a one-time deposit of US\$100,000 into the bank of MoLVT as collateral. According to the Sub-decree 57, regulation of the PRAs was the responsibility of the MoLVT, which could impose penalties for any PRAs that did not abide by Sub-decree 57. The deposit would be for compensation for any damage caused by those PRAs who mistreated migrant workers or neglected their responsibilities to protect them in cases of need. The Sub-decree 57 did not state clearly whether owners of the PRAs must be Cambodian citizens. In 2007, an Association of Cambodian Recruitment Agencies (ACRA) was established as a professional organisation. ACRA works to promote safe migration of all Cambodian people who choose to migrate through legal channels to work abroad (ACRA, 2021). ACRA works with its member PRAs to ensure that PRAs abide by the laws and regulations in recruiting, training, and sending Cambodian migrant workers abroad. In November 2010, there were 32 PRAs operating in Cambodia with licenses issued by MoLVT (MMN, 2021). As of early 2021, there were around 100 registered PRAs in Cambodia of which 60 PRAs were members of ACRA.

Numerous criticisms were made against the Cambodian government for using the 1995 Sub-decree for so long without amendment as it did not reflect the fast-changing dynamic of labour migration in Cambodia. For example, in 2007 UN ESCAP wrote that “Sub-decree 57 is a reflection of the current weakness and inefficacy of the labour migration system in Cambodia” and “the 22 articles of the Sub-decree are rudimentary and lack clarity in both the processes and the desirable minimum standards” (UN ESCAP, 2007, p. 15). A group of researchers made the same criticism some years later. “The Sub-decree [57] is widely regarded as lacking comprehensive coverage, being vague and most provisions being too broad and lacking clarity” (Hing et al., 2011, cited in Hing & Ly, 2014, p. 16). For example, under Article 20 in terms of the punishment of PRAs, there were no clear details about what the punishment was or how it would be implemented. In addition, there was no clear

provision about the details or information of the owners of the PRAs in terms of nationality, age and status. Notably, government officials are not allowed to own any PRAs.

Due to numerous criticisms and the changing trends of labour migration in Cambodia, including the feminisation of migration, the Cambodian government in 2011, to replace the out-dated Sub-decree 57 (MoLVT, 2021) adopted a new Sub-decree 190<sup>5</sup>. This new Sub-decree, namely Sub-decree 190 on the Management of the Sending of Cambodian Migrant Workers Abroad through Private Recruitment Agencies, was issued on 17 August 2011. This new Sub-decree was to, firstly, replace the Sub-decree that was out-dated and contained many flawed provisions and, secondly, to better regulate the process of sending Cambodian workers abroad. This process is clearly stated in the PLMC which will be described later in this section. Sub-decree 190 consists of 43 Articles within 15 Chapters. Under Article 5, MoLVT is given the power to implement this Sub-decree in cooperation with other ministries, particularly MoI and MoFA. This new Sub-decree is still currently in use and it is clearer than the previous Sub-decree 57. For example, it provides clearer provisions and expectations for each stage of migration from pre-departure to the return of migrant workers, punishment of PRAs, complaint mechanisms, social security schemes for migrant workers by host countries, and migrant workers' remittances. These provisions and expectations were unclear or even absent in Sub-decree 57. Nonetheless, there is no provision for any special measures to protect female migrant workers given their vulnerability in migration journeys.

Despite these additional 'protections', Sub-decree 190 has been under criticism from various labour rights group such as the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (LICADHO), a prominent human rights group in Cambodia. LICADHO has been critical from the outset of the amended Sub-Decree in 2011. LICADHO, in its comments on the Sub-decree 190, describes it as "a dismal failure from the perspective of migrant worker rights" (LICADHO, 2011, p. 1). LICADHO (2011) also asserts that Sub-decree 190 fails to protect the rights of migrant workers and fails to address a number of longstanding issues of migration such as "debt bondage through the provision of enticement loans to workers, the facilitation and use of forged legal documents, and failure to pay workers their full salaries and/or not paying any salary until the end of the contract" (p. 1).

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<sup>5</sup> This source is in Khmer language. English version is currently unavailable. All English translation is my own.

### **5.1.2 Ministerial Orders or Prakas**

The MoLVT issues ministerial Orders or Prakas related to labour migration. At least eight Prakas have been issued since 2013 by MoLVT to supplement Sub-decree 190. Those Prakas aim to clarify the technical terms and provisions, provide detailed guidance for implementing Sub-decree 190, and especially, regulate the PRAs. Although these Prakas are non-binding instruments, all PRAs have to follow and abide by these at all times. Another Prakas, Prakas 108 on the Education of HIV/AIDS, Safe Migration and Labour Rights for Cambodian Workers Abroad issued in 2006, is still in use. It aims at enforcing compulsory pre-departure training for Cambodian migrant workers in order to prevent their vulnerability to health problems while working abroad (MMN, 2021).

### **5.1.3 Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia (PLMC)**

Labour migration policy in Cambodia is currently guided by the Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia 2019-2023.<sup>6</sup> This policy is in the third phase, building upon the first two policies, PLMC 2010-2014 and PLMC 2015-2018. The Cambodian government recognises that labour migration is important for promoting employment and reducing the poverty of its people and realises the need for a concrete policy for these growing labour migration trends (MoLVT, 2010). Reports and recommendations from local and international non-government organisations and UN agencies working on migration related issues such as International Organisation for Migration (IOM), International Labour Organisation (ILO), and The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN) have encouraged the government to adopt these policies in order to better manage and govern transnational labour migration.

MoLVT has formulated all three PLMCs with technical support from the ILO and critical input from various inter-government institutions, civil society organisations, Employers' Association, trade unions, Association of PRAs, and other development partners (MoLVT, 2010; MoLVT, 2014; MoLVT, 2018). The establishment of these policies is based on the realisation by the Cambodian government that labour migration trends domestically and internationally have changed rapidly and become very dynamic in nature in this globalised world.

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<sup>6</sup> This document is currently available in Khmer version. English version of this document is still in draft. All English translation is my own.

The current PLMC 2019-2023 reflects upon the Cambodian government's stated commitment to strengthening the governance of labour migration of its citizens in order to maximise the benefits of labour migration for the migrants, their families, and the nation (MoLVT, 2018). The current PLMC also has an emphasis on assessing contemporary trends of labour migration and domestic and international demand and supply of labour forces (MoLVT, 2018). It also describes labour migration frameworks and instruments adopted by Cambodia and the challenges encountered by the implementation of the previous two PLMCs. To realise the goals and purposes of this policy, numerous objectives and activities are planned. These include enhancing policies and legislation for better management of labour migration, strengthening bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation, regulating PRAs, and deploying labour counsellors/labour attachés at the destination countries, protecting Cambodian migrant workers abroad, and strengthening mechanisms to support migrant workers' families and returning migrant workers (MoLVT, 2018).

#### **5.1.4 Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs)/Bilateral Agreements**

Cambodia has signed a number of MoUs and bilateral agreements concerning labour migration with the governments of destination countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. These MoUs and agreements aim at the cooperation of recruitment, employment and repatriation of Cambodian migrant workers and the protection of their rights while working. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia signed two new MoUs with Malaysia on the recruitment and employment of workers (one is for general workers and another is for domestic workers) in 2015, a new MoU and an Agreement with Thailand on cooperation of the employment of workers in 2015, and a Bilateral Agreement to send Cambodian female domestic workers to Singapore in 2012 (MoLVT, 2018). Besides these, Cambodia has also signed a number of MoUs and Agreements on the cooperation of employment of workers with other countries including South Korea in 2006, Kuwait in 2009, Qatar in 2011, Saudi Arabia in 2016, Hong Kong in 2017, and Japan in 2017 (MoLVT, 2018).

#### **5.1.5 International and Regional Labour Migration Instruments**

In response to international labour migration and to align its labour migration policies with international standards, Cambodia has signed and ratified a number of regional and international labour migration instruments. During the International Labour Conference held by ILO annually, international labour standards were adopted and these standards are referred to in the eight fundamental rights conventions of the ILO (ILO, 2021) which will

be described below. Cambodia has signed and ratified a number of UN Conventions including Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN CEDAW) in 1992 and its Optional Protocol in 2009 and UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families in 2004. Cambodia has also signed and ratified all eight fundamental rights conventions of ILO surrounding labour migration. All the conventions ratified by the Cambodian government are legally binding and the Cambodian government has an obligation to implement these conventions and provide periodical reports to the Committees for the relevant conventions for updates and to get recommendations. Additionally, the Cambodian government needs to integrate these conventions into its laws and policies wherever relevant, especially the policy on labour migration.

At the regional level, Cambodia *has* been a signatory of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers since 2007 and a signatory of the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers since 2017. These regional instruments are non-binding; however, they provide important frameworks for the Cambodian government and the other governments of ASEAN to work together to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers in the region.

In summary, there is a complex web of policies, legislation and regulations governing labour migration. While the Cambodian government claims that labour migration is a key contributing factor to “national development” and that labour migration policies, legislation and regulations play important roles in managing and maximising the benefits of this labour migration, the “national development” contributed to by Cambodian migrants, especially female migrant workers, and the effects of these policies, legislation and regulations can be questioned. What does this all mean? Do these policies, legislation and regulations really meet the regional and international labour migration standards or they are just to cover up the real practices of Cambodian labour migration?

## **5.2 The Analysis of Cambodia’s Labour Migration Policies**

It is encouraging to note that the Cambodian government has adopted legislation and, numerous policies, MoUs, and Agreements and signed and ratified a number of international and regional instruments concerning labour migration in recent decades. However, the effectiveness of these policies, legislation and other regulations can be questioned in regards to their enforcement.

Cambodia has failed to ratify the ILO's Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189) despite the urge from civil society organisations (IDWFED, 2013) and the fact that many Cambodian female migrant domestic workers have reported exploitation and abuse while working abroad. This convention is fundamentally important for protecting the rights of domestic workers and for preventing such vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The government has not revealed the reason for not ratifying this convention and anecdotal evidence might suggest the reason is because domestic workers are not thought to be important. This failure is evidence of the lack of commitment by the Cambodian government to protect its nationals, particularly women and girls, who engage in domestic work abroad.

It is also important to note that the description of labour migration's gender dimensions (that had existed in the first and second PLMC) is missing in the current PLMC 2019-2023 and Sub-decree 190 does not contain any clauses related to the gendered nature of migration. The Cambodian government itself has acknowledged the feminisation of labour migration and that women are more vulnerable to exploitation than men in the workplace. This is especially true for Cambodian female migrant domestic workers whose jobs are in private homes in host countries where the protections are limited under labour laws (MoLVT, 2014). The first PLMC 2010-2014 described gender dimensions in international migration by analysing the feminisation of migration and the types of jobs women migrant workers often do in destination countries. It also outlines the particular vulnerabilities faced working as overseas migrant workers in some specific sectors such as domestic work and manufacturing (MoLVT, 2010). Likewise, the second PLMC 2015-2018 described the specific gender dimensions of labour migration where Cambodian women participate in labour migration (MoLVT, 2014). The analysis included reasons why women migrate abroad for jobs, the tendency for women to take these particular jobs, the factors associated with vulnerabilities, and the victimisation of women while working in destination countries. These analyses of gender dimensions are important in policy making as they provide gender perspectives and gender sensitive evidence when formulating labour migration policy frameworks and strategic activities to achieve policy goals and objectives. For example, in the second PLMC 2015-2018, gender sensitivity was very much considered when implementing the policy goals of reviewing international frameworks and formulating new legislation and regulations concerning labour migration (MoLVT, 2014). Why then were gender dimensions removed from the PLMC 2019-2023? Without paying sufficient attention to gender dimensions in labour migration, Cambodian women's

participation in labour migration remains challenging. Without all of these dimensions being carefully considered the needs of women migrants will not be sufficiently addressed.

Despite published reports about the problems faced by the Cambodian female migrant workers (and male migrant workers); the Cambodian government has yet to deploy any labour attachés to the destination countries. This includes Thailand where around one million of Cambodian labour migrants have been working. The main responsibility of labour attachés is to solve labour conflicts for all Cambodian migrants irrespective of their status. Is this because of a lack of human resources or funding to fulfil these positions or has the Cambodian government a hidden agenda?

The policies, legislation and other regulations concerning labour migration in Cambodia authorise registered PRAs to recruit, train and send Cambodian migrants to work in all destination countries in Southeast Asia. Cambodian migrants have to pay the expensive costs of migration to the PRAs. The government has never regulated this cost of migration charged by the PRAs. This prompts doubt and questions about the government's effectiveness in regulating PRAs. Despite the fact that government officials are not permitted to own PRAs, there have been rumours that government officials do own many. There are also questions about why the government does not utilise public agencies to handle the process of sending its nationals to work abroad. This may actually eliminate the cost of legal migration. The sending of Cambodian migrant workers to work in South Korea through the Employment Permit System (EPS) is an exemplary case with public agencies involved in the process (The Phnom Penh Post, 2021). Although other destination countries use different systems for the employment of migrant workers, there should be ways that public agencies can be tasked to handle the process. Indeed, the privatisation of the task of sending Cambodian migrants to work abroad can be interpreted as part of the structural adjustment policy employed by the capitalist state within neoliberal globalisation (Prempeh, 2006). It means the government (the capitalist state) cooperates with the PRAs (the local capitalists) to gain benefits from the labour of its people.

Although there are policies, legislation and other regulations in place, in reality Cambodian migrant workers, especially female migrant workers, do not seem to enjoy their rights and safety while working abroad. The vast majority of Cambodian migrants still migrate to work abroad, particularly to Thailand, through irregular channels (Tunon & Rim, 2013). Reports and news about labour exploitation, abuse and trafficking of Cambodian migrants abound in

destinations within and beyond Southeast Asia. This is because irregular migration is not covered by the scope of these instruments and frameworks. Legislation and policies are obviously only for the support of those who migrate through regular channels (despite its effectiveness still being questionable), but the millions who migrate unofficially are left extremely vulnerable. This seems to contradict the intention of the Cambodian government to protect its nationals working abroad. The Mekong Policy Institute, a leading institution in the area of migration policy, asserts that the vast majority of Cambodian migrants migrate to work in Thailand through irregular channels due to the complicated process and the barriers of legal channels (Bylander & Reid, 2017). Among those irregular migrants, many have been arrested, detained and deported back to Cambodia by Thai authorities. Actions taken by the Cambodian government are such as arresting Cambodian migrants who were attempting to illegally cross the border to work in Thailand without documents (Khmer Times, 2021; The Phnom Penh Post, 2020c) and receiving thousands of Cambodian undocumented migrants who were deported back from Thailand and other destination countries (NCCT, 2018). This sparks questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of Cambodian labour migration legislation, policies and regulations and the protection provided by the Cambodian government for its nationals working abroad. From a global perspective, all migrants regardless of their legal status are entitled to receive protection. No one should be left out.

Critically, the nature of the legislation and policies seem to reflect the Cambodian government encouraging the outbound migration of its citizens to “increase foreign remittances, cope with unemployment and alleviate poverty” (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The Cambodian government publicly claims that labour migration has enormously contributed to the increasing livelihoods of families, the community and the socio-economic development of Cambodia (MoLVT, 2018). In addition, in 2018, the 1.23 million of Cambodian documented migrant workers (MoLVT, 2018) sent an estimated US\$2.3 billion of remittances back to Cambodia. This prompted the government to continue formulating its policies and expanding its cooperation with potential destination countries to increase the number of Cambodians working abroad. But the government’s claim may in fact be different from the reality.

In capitalist societies, human labour is used for the benefit of capitalists. Following this premise, it can be suggested that the Cambodian government acts as a capitalist state that uses the labour of its nationals to gain benefits for so-called ‘national development’, through sending them to work abroad and receiving their incoming remittances. However, as discussed, this national development is uneven and does not benefit the labour migrants. Although the

government does not exploit their labour directly, the lack of insufficient protection while they are working abroad and the neglect of their social wellbeing when returning back home, reflects the capitalist nature of a disinterest in people's lives and wellbeing.

Moreover, the Cambodian government seems to cooperate with the governments of the host countries for the employment of its citizens abroad and it is believed that the labour migration policies and regulations concerned are partly influenced by the host countries. Cambodia is a labour-supplying and poor nation, while Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore are all the labour-demanding and wealthy nations in Southeast Asia. Cambodia expects that more Cambodian labour including female labour will be demanded by countries in Southeast Asia to fulfil their labour shortages. In the PLMC 2015-2018, MoLVT (2014) asserts that "With an ageing population in bordering Thailand and in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, demand for domestic workers in the region is expected to continue to grow" (p. 14). This means that there will be an ongoing growth in women's labour migration to work as domestic workers in those countries. Therefore these governments, the sources and the hosts, have to cooperate with each other for any win-win solutions. However, it is unclear who will actually win. The host countries may well gain cheap-labour migrants to fulfil their labour shortages in economic production and to do the jobs which their citizens do not want to do. Although there is no statistical evidence to prove how much Cambodian migrant workers, female and male, have contributed to the economies of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, it may be significant. It is undeniable that the Cambodian government benefits from the labour migration of its nationals through incoming remittances and avoiding the responsibility of creating domestic jobs for its nationals to address unemployment. In terms of the labour migration policies and regulations, it seems then that the Cambodian government has made compromises with destination countries. Take for instance the MOUs between Cambodia and Malaysia on the recruitment and employment of workers. The Cambodian government leaves the treatment and protection of Cambodian migrant workers, female and male, in the hands of the Malaysian government with the clauses that almost everything should comply with all Malaysian laws, rules, regulations, policies and directives. For Cambodia, there is no clear mechanism on the protection of its nationals while working in Malaysia. As mentioned earlier, there is still no Cambodian labour attaché employed in Malaysia and the labour policy failures have caused troubles for labour migrants.

The cooperation between the source and the host countries reflects on the assertion by sociologist Robinson (2014) that the rise of the transnational capitalist class, "has attempted to

position itself as a global ruling class” (p. 14) in the era of global capitalism. The governments in these countries of the Southeast Asian region represent the transnational capitalist class in this context. The nature of Cambodia’s labour migration policies, legislation and regulations seem to support this assertion. The host governments and the capitalist firms in those countries have used the labour of millions of women and men migrant workers from Cambodia for their businesses and economic production. Obviously, the capitalist firms include local and multi-national capitalists, especially Western capitalists. It is undeniable that numerous companies and firms in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore where migrant workers, including Cambodian migrant workers, are working, appear to be the property of the Western investors (Western capitalists) from where capitalism originated.

So, has the Cambodian government really been trying to formulate new policies and regulations for the benefit of Cambodian migrant workers, especially female migrant workers? Evidence suggest that it is the resistance of the Cambodian migrant, the work of lobbying and advocacy of CSOs, policy recommendations from UN agencies, and research paper recommendations that have pressured the Cambodian government to act. Many Cambodian migrant workers including female migrant workers resist exploitative working conditions and abuse committed by their employers in the destination countries as described above. The agency of these workers has prompted the governments of destination and origin to take actions. NGOs and regional networks/alliances in the countries of origin and destination have also organised a series of lobbying and advocacy events and consultations on migration and migrant workers in order to demand the governments protect the rights of migrants irrespective of their legal status and where they are. MMN, for instance, have done numerous research studies on migration related issues and advocated with the governments of destination and origin through policy dialogues and recommendations (MMN, 2019; MMN, 2017; MMN, 2016; MMN, 2014). MMN have also provided numerous policy recommendations to the Cambodian government on the improvement of the role of Cambodia to protect the rights of all Cambodian migrants. In addition, the mass return of Cambodian migrants from Thailand to Cambodia in 2014 can be considered part of the resistance. While on the one hand Cambodian migrants fled out of Thailand due to fears about personal safety, on the other hand those migrants seem to have used their labour power to effectively pressure the Thai government to respect and protect the rights of migrants in Thailand, revealing the interdependency between migrants and the Thai economy. These instances of worker resistance have clearly shown that the notion of labour migration being important for “the national development” or “the national interest” is solely

defined by the government, the Cambodian government in particular. This national development or interest only focuses on the remittances sent back home by labour migrants, not on the welfare of the labour migrants.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis assumes that global capitalism has significantly impacted on humanity, especially female labour in the current global economy. Global capitalism enables the gaining of benefits for the capitalist class from capitalist production through the exploitation of workers on a global scale. This has been achieved in part through seeking for ever increasing avenues of profit through utilising working-class labourers and low wages. Driven by globalisation and the capitalist system, the global economy has also accelerated people's movements across the globe, particularly in the case of transnational labour migration. Labour migrants have thus become an important part of the labour force for the global economy. The vast majority of these migrants are from developing countries where there is an assumption that people have low-skills and poor livelihoods.

Since the 1980s an increasing demand for migrant labour has led to the feminisation of migration. Feminist scholars have asserted that the global phenomenon of the feminisation of migration has been due to the growing need for women's labour to fulfil jobs in feminised sectors of work such as domestic work. Despite the huge contributions by female labour migrants for host and source countries, female migrants have suffered exploitation and abuse throughout all stages of their migration journeys, especially while working at the countries of destination. In many ways, women's social reproduction has been devalued and thought of in terms of its distance from the 'productive' sphere of economy. This is despite the critical role women play in the maintenance of life and reproduction of a new labour force.

In Cambodia, the push for sending female migrants to work abroad began in the 1990s with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore the three countries of destination in Southeast Asia, for Cambodian labour migrants. These Cambodian female labour migrants are part of the system of global capitalism in which their labour either directly or indirectly serves global capitalists. In this way, they are part of the international proletariat of a labour force. Cambodian female migrants work in various sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture. They also work as domestic workers and carers for middle and upper-class families in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore so women of the middle-classes can be involved in productive work. Often, Cambodian female migrants perform the jobs the local citizens do not want to perform. The work of Cambodian female labour migrants benefits the transnational capitalists and this has contributed to the global economy. In this sense, Cambodia-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore is seen as a single regional labour market of global capitalism and has become a transnational state; using women's labour for the benefit of capitalists.

The Cambodian government can be seen through the context of the needs of global capitalism. The formulation of labour migration policies and legislation all encourage outbound labour migration of its citizens and includes women and girls. Billions of dollars of remittances are sent back home to Cambodia by the Cambodian migrants with a significant proportion of these remittances made by female labour migrants. This has been a significant injection of funds into the national economy of Cambodia. This is represented as beneficial to Cambodia's "national development".

The transfer of remittances through both formal and informal channels by Cambodian female labour migrants (and male labour migrants) from the destination countries in Southeast Asia to their homes in Cambodia have benefited finance capitalists through service charges for the transfer of funds. This local version of finance capitalism is both formal and informal and could be named "micro" finance capitalism in this contemporary era of global capitalism.

This significant contribution by female migrants for the "national development" of Cambodia has come at a cost. Firstly, many Cambodian female migrants chose to migrate through irregular channels where they experience the risks of being arrested, detained and deported back to Cambodia by the authorities of destination countries or in some cases, are trapped into trafficking. Secondly, Cambodian female migrants have experienced a lack of protection and support from both the government of the destination countries and the Cambodian government. In the destination countries, informal sectors are not generally covered under labour laws. Thus, those who work in this sector receive few benefits from any laws. Likewise, the Cambodian government does not provide sufficient protection and support to Cambodian female migrants. There is very little in the way of services or support for Cambodian migrant returnees. All governments appear to have cooperated well with each other to gain benefits from women's labour migration. Thirdly, labour migration has caused physical and emotional effects for Cambodian women and the families they leave behind. Many Cambodian female migrants leave their children with elderly parents which causes fracturing of family relationship and negative effects on children's wellbeing. Because of this, grandmothers have to do another round of social reproduction labour.

The Cambodian government claims that Cambodian transnational labour migration has contributed to the Cambodian "national economy" and "national development" through remittances sent back home every year. The findings of this thesis show the need to engage critically with this claim. In fact, the "national development" is uneven as it does not benefit all who belong to the Cambodian nation especially labour migrants. This development just

benefits a very few. Cambodian labour migrants including female migrants simply survive but they do not ‘develop’ much. The system of labour migration in the context of global capitalism means the state does not have to provide welfare that it otherwise might – people have to provide their own welfare, and for their families, through remittances they send back home.

Having faced numerous problems while migrating and working abroad as well as receiving limited protection from the source and the host countries, Cambodian female migrants resist whenever they can. The findings of this thesis reveal that Cambodian female migrants have struggled to resist exploitation and abuse and improve their working conditions through joining trade unions and participating in strikes. For example, Cambodian female migrant domestic workers in Malaysia have joined with MTUC to protest for wage increases and improve working conditions and Cambodian female migrants in Thailand have also participated in strikes to protest for decent wages and freedom. This agency of women’s labour migrants has sent a collective signal to the governments of destination and origin to help protect female migrants while acknowledging their meaningful contribution to national economies. This is especially so for the Cambodian government with its uneven national development despite incoming remittances made by women migrants.

The agency of women’s labour migrants together with men’s labour migrants and the lobbying and advocacy of CSOs working on migration related issues over the past decade have put pressure on the Cambodian government to formulate or keep improving its policies and legislation governing labour migration. This includes action taken by Cambodian labour migrants as mentioned earlier and criticism and policy recommendations given to the Cambodian government by international, regional and local CSOs. As result, the Cambodian government has formulated a number of policies and legislation governing labour migration and adopted a number of international and regional labour migration instruments in order to meet with the international and regional labour migration standards. The presence of these policies and legislation can be considered a contributing outcome of the resistance of labour migrants and efforts made by CSOs. This is just the beginning of the journey for the improvement of the situation of Cambodian female migrants, both regular and irregular. Hopefully, Cambodian female migrants will receive greater attention and full protection from the governments of the destination and origin countries in the near future.

There is a strong need to more deeply understand the situation of Cambodian female labour migrants in Southeast Asia and *beyond* in these fast-changing trends of migration in this era of global capitalism. Thus, more research related to Cambodian women’s labour migration are

needed. These should investigate actions taken by the Cambodian government to improve and implement its policies and legislation to provide real benefits to Cambodian female migrants irrespective of their documentation status. Global perspectives should be employed in the analysis so as to see the bigger picture of female migration in the global context and politics given the complex nature of migration.

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